

Use of Projective Techniques in Emotional Disturbance Evaluations

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Abstract

Determining eligibility for the special education category Emotional Disturbance (ED) is a challenging task. The difficulty in identifying students with ED is due, in part, to problematic federal criteria (Olympia et al., 2004; Skiba, Grizzle, & Minke, 1994). Unchanges since 1975, these criteria have created an environment in which inconsistent assessment practices and diagnostic decisions are inevitable. The current study examines school psychologists' ED assessment practices, and in particular, the use of projective assessment techniques in eligibility determinations. The results suggest that school psychologists regularly use these controversial diagnostic techniques despite questions regarding their psychometric soundness (i.e., reliability and validity) and utility. Among the projective measures reported, those with the most limited empirical support (e.g., H-T-P, KFDS) were most widely used.

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Over forty years since the category of Emotional Disturbance (ED) was first conceptualized within P.L. 94-142, the federal ED guidelines remain unchanged by legislators and heavily criticized by professionals (Merrell & Walker, 2004). Much of the scrutiny has been directed toward the original ED definition and eligibility criteria, which has been described by experts as vague, poorly defined, and professionally indefensible (e.g., Skiba, Grizzle, & Minke, 1994). A lack of clear federal guidelines and the failure to periodically update the eligibility criteria comes at the expense of the students for whom the federal law was intended to protect. Conservative estimates place the number of students in need of ED services at 3-6% (Merrell, 2008), yet less than 1% of all students in the United States are being served under the ED classification (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Others estimate that as many as 80% of students with diagnosable emotional disturbances are not being identified and served under IDEA (Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, 2003).

The ambiguity of the ED definition and its accompanying eligibility criteria makes identifying students who are entitled to special education services a challenging task. In fact, Forness and Kavale (2000) assert that "of several challenges that continue to face special education regarding children with emotional and behavioral disorders, the problem of eligibility is among the most pressing" (p. 267). The terminology contained in the ED definition has been widely assailed in many professional circles and invites subjective decision-making and inconsistent application on the part of the practitioner. Yet, even after several decades of persistent criticism and calls for revision, the federal eligibility criteria for ED remains unchanged.

The lack of clear federal guidelines has significant implications for school psychologists and other members of IDEA-required multidisciplinary assessment teams. This is particularly true for the selection of methods and procedures utilized by those involved in the direct of assessment of students for whom ED is a diagnostic consideration. Indeed, recent findings suggest the implementation of existing criteria results in subjective and inconsistent assessment practices among school psychologists.

Recently, Hanchon and Allen (2013) surveyed a group of school psychologists to examine the data collection techniques and assessment tools they used within the context of initial ED eligibility determination. Their results revealed that, in many instances, commonly recommended sources of data that should help to inform eligibility decisions (e.g., classroom observations, parent and teacher interviews, student interviews) were not routinely included in practitioners' evaluations. Moreover, in a follow up study Allen and Hanchon (2013) found that school psychologists frequently relied on only select sources of data (e.g., behavior ratings scales) to inform initial eligibility decisions rather than consistently employing comprehensive, multidimensional assessments that reflect broadly accepted "best practice" in psychoeducational assessment.

The ambiguous and vague diagnostic criteria permit individual biases or motivations, whether intentional or unintentional, to influence assessment planning and eligibility determinations. The problematic federal ED definition and resulting inconsistent assessment practices employed by school psychologists likely contributes to disproportionate placement rates among racial minorities (Wagner et al., 2005) and students from lower socioeconomic status and single parent homes (Losen & Orfield, 2002; Wagner et al., 2005).

The lack of clear federal guidelines has serious implications for school psychologists who are frequently tasked with both planning and conducting ED evaluations. Far too often, commonly recommended sources of data (e.g., classroom observations, parent and teacher interviews, student interviews) are not included in evaluations, while other techniques with limited empirical support are routinely used. The focus of the current study is on one such technique with a history of very limited research and psychometric evidence, the projective assessment of personality and behavior in children (e.g., House-Tree-Person, Kinetic Family Drawing, TAT/CAT).

Projective Assessment Techniques

Projective assessment of personality and behavior variables is based on the belief that individuals subconsciously reveal themselves through responses to ambiguous tasks, such as verbal free association, drawing tests, inkblot tests, and thematic picture/storytelling cards (Merrell, 1999). The notion of projective assessment is rooted in the psychodynamic approach to psychological assessment, which asserts that unconscious needs, drives, and desires are revealed through these techniques. Merrell (1999) draws a distinction between this clearly "projective" approach and other alternative approaches, which interpret test-takers' responses to these tasks as "direct statements of who they are as a person" (p. 180). As an example, Merrell provides a description of an individual's human figure drawing as a direct statement of his/her body image. An approach such as this offers an alternative framework to traditional "projective" methods, yet it still requires a potentially uncomfortable level of interpretive inference and speculation on the part of the psychologist.

Although the use of projective techniques is controversial and critiques questioning the validity of the approaches abound (Garb, Wood, Lilienfeld, & Nezworski, 2002; Merrell,

1999; Miller & Nickerson, 2006), they remain very popular assessment tools among clinical psychologists (Wilson & Reschly, 1996), licensed counselors (Peterson, 2014), and school psychologists (Hojnoski, Morrison, Brown, & Matthews, 2006). Among school psychologists, the most commonly used projective techniques are the House-Tree-Person, Kinetic Family Drawing System, TAT/CAT, and the Bender Gestalt Test (Hojnoski et al., 2006). Furthermore, these questionable techniques appear to be used at a higher rate with some of our most vulnerable populations of students, minority and English language learners (Ochoa, Riccio, Jimenez, de Alba, & Sines, 2004).

House-Tree-Person. The House-Tree-Person (H-T-P) technique is designed “to provide psychologists and psychiatrists...with an examining procedure with which to acquire diagnostically and prognostically significant data concerning a subject’s total personality and the interaction of that personality with its environment” (Buck, 1964). The projective technique uses three drawings (i.e., house, tree, and person) that purportedly allow the examiner to gain a picture of the subject’s personality. Proponents suggest that the house drawings signify the inner feelings of home life and family relationships, the tree drawings manifest as the deep, unconscious parts of the subject’s personality, and the drawing of the human is associated with the subject’s beliefs about themselves or their desire of who they wish to be (Wenck, 1970).

The H-T-P technique is separated into two phases that include, in total, four steps for implementing the assessment (Buck, 1964). The first phase is non-verbal and involves the actual drawing of the items; the second phase is verbal as the subject is asked to elaborate on his/her drawings. According to advocates of the technique, the examiner may wish to further probe the subject to learn more about the subconscious personality of the subject.

Interpretation of the H-T-P is based on examining the drawings for specific characteristics or “indicators”. From a variety of guides (most are two or three decades old and have not been updated), the psychologist ascertains the meaning of each indicator. For example, if a subject omits a chimney in his/her house drawing, one such guide (Ogdon, 1977) suggests a lack of psychological warmth in the home (in addition to other high inference interpretations). Most of these interpretive guides are replete with sexually-themed statements and judgments (Ogdon, 1977; Wenck, 1970). One author suggests that a male who draws a cane may have homosexual tendencies and purports that a drawing with an emphasized nose means “phallic preoccupation and/or castration fears, sexual inadequacy with compensatory feelings, or possible homosexual tendencies” (Wenck, 1970, p. 88).

Kinetic Family Drawing. According to Knoff & Prout (1985), the Kinetic Family Drawing System (KFDS) seeks to unlock the inner feelings of a child about his/her family dynamics, as well as to assess characteristics of their personality and psychological status. This instrument is similar to the House-Tree-Person whereas the child is asked to draw pictures; however, the child is specifically asked to draw the family members being active. After the child draws, the examiner enters the inquiry phase wherein numerous questions are asked about the picture. This tool offers a method in which the child can talk about family dynamics in a non-threatening and indirect manner.

Proponents of the KFDS assert that the tool can be used to generate hypotheses about the child’s family dynamics and the child’s personality. One of the guidebooks suggests a variety of hypotheses be formed based on the characteristics of the drawings. For example, a child that uses stick figures may be resisting to the test setting, have a low IQ, or a use of

regression as a defense mechanism (Knoff & Prout, 1985). In addition, if an examinee draws the symbol of a snake, the handbook provides the hypothesis of the snake being a “phallic symbol indicative of sexual tension” (p. 18). As was the case with the H-T-P interpretive guides, empirical support for these statements is either extremely limited or non-existent.

Thematic Apperception Test/Children’s Apperception Test. The Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) is a story-telling technique designed to reveal a subject’s personality dynamics. Upon being presented with a picture on a card, the examinee is asked to describe what is happening in the picture, and to subsequently speculate as to what happened before and after the picture (Tomkins, 1947). Similar to the TAT is the Children’s Apperception Test (CAT), which claims to assess a child’s personality using the same basic premise and methodology as the TAT (Kroon, Goudena, & Rispens, 1998). The CAT offers two alternative forms, one in which people are the central figures in each picture, while the other uses animals as main characters.

Kroon, Goudena, and Rispens (1998) state that, “a psychodynamically trained clinician will easily recognize themes from psychodynamic developmental theory, such as feeding problems, toilet training, Oedipal feelings, sibling rivalry, and aggression” (p. 102). Nevertheless, the authors note that the CAT lacks psychometric robustness, a systematic method for administration, and empirical validation of the interpretive method employed. Similar to the H-T-P and KFDS, the TAT/CAT fails to meet the basic standards of reliable and valid assessment of children set forth by the American Psychological Association, American Educational Research Association, and National Council on Measurement in Education in 2010.

The current study sought to extend previous research exploring the assessment practices of school psychologists by focusing on the school-based use of projective assessment techniques (e.g., H-T-P, KFDS, TAT/CAT) in ED eligibility evaluations. This was accomplished through a survey of practicing school psychologists that addressed the following research questions:

Research Question #1 – Do school psychologists find projective techniques to be useful in identifying children with an ED?

Research Question #2 – How frequently are projective techniques used in school-based ED evaluations, and does this depend on how recently the school psychologist was trained?

Research Question #3 – What are the most widely used projective techniques in initial ED evaluations?

Method

Participants and Procedures

School psychologists were recruited through the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). All respondents were asked to complete an online survey of ED assessment practices in the schools. A total of 214 participants completed the survey. 172 were female (80.4%) and 42 were male (19.6%; two declined to report their gender). The majority of participants were Caucasian ($n=196$; 91.6%), 8 were African-American (3.7%), 6 were Hispanic (2.8%), and 1 was Native American (0.5%). “Specialist” was the most

commonly identified degree earned among the group ($n=124$; 57.9%), followed by “Masters” ($n=48$; 22.4%) and “Doctorate” ($n=40$; 18.7%). The mean experience as a school psychologist was 11.2 years ($SD=8.4$).

Participants completed the 32-item ED Assessment Practice Survey, which was created by the principal investigators and hosted through an internet survey service. Several items prompted respondents to identify the frequency with which they utilized various assessment tools/instruments (e.g., behavior rating scales, self-report measures, projective techniques) and other data collection techniques (e.g., diagnostic interviews, observations, developmental questionnaires) when ED was reported as a referral concern. Additional items instructed the respondents to rate the perceived usefulness of each tool/data collection technique in identifying students with ED.

Results and Discussion

Although research suggests that school psychologists understand the importance of utilizing a variety of assessment tools and sources of clinical data, actual practice is less consistent (Allen & Hanchon, 2013; Hanchon & Allen, 2013). These studies suggested that most school psychologists (>50%) meet the expectation of conducting comprehensive ED evaluations, as indicated by the inclusion of common assessment techniques (e.g., behavior ratings scales, teacher interview, developmental questionnaires) in all ED eligibility determinations. Nevertheless, our work revealed that approximately 20% of school psychologists failed to routinely include several of these techniques (e.g., parent interviews) that most experts deem critical to ethical diagnostic decision-making when ED is under consideration.

It seems plausible that variability in selecting assessment tools and other important sources of data are the direct result of a federal definition that does very little to aid in the determination of ED eligibility or to promote a valid conceptual understanding of emotional disturbance as a construct. As a result, school psychologists are left to rely principally on their own clinical judgment when making these high-stakes ED eligibility determinations on behalf of troubled children and youth. The results of the current study draw into question the clinical judgement used when selecting appropriate evaluation tools. For example, when asked their opinions of the usefulness of projectives, approximately 10% of respondents reported that data from these techniques are “critical” for determining ED eligibility, while another 56% found them to be “somewhat useful” to “very useful”. Only 34% of respondents rated projective techniques as “not useful” (see Figure 1) in determining ED eligibility. It appears these beliefs regarding the usefulness of projectives is directly related to the inclusion of these techniques in school-based ED evaluations.

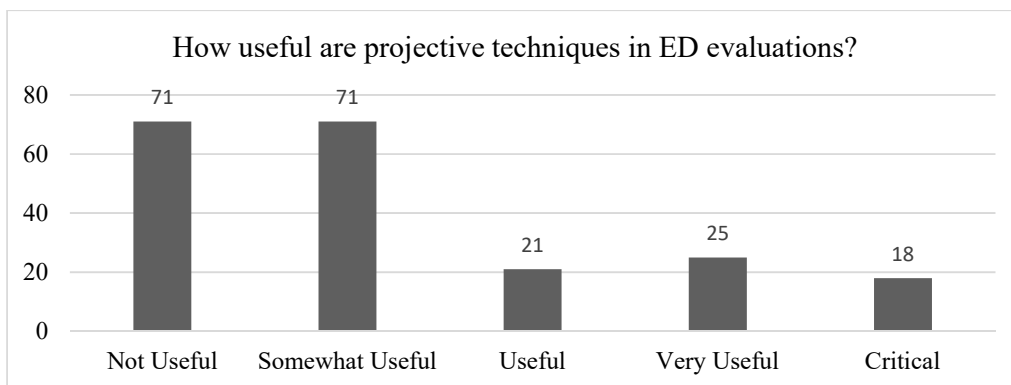


Figure 1: *How useful are projective techniques in ED evaluations?* (n=206)

Thirty-seven percent of respondents indicated that they “frequently” or “always” include projective techniques in their initial ED evaluations (see Figure 2). Another 32% of the sample reported at least “occasionally” using the techniques, while 31% “never” included them. An independent samples t-test revealed no differences, in terms of projective use, between school psychologists with less than 10 years of experience and those with greater than 10 years of experience ($p > .01$). These results were unexpected given the paucity of contemporary research supporting the use of projective instruments. As researchers, we are left with questions regarding how practitioners reconcile the poor psychometric properties of these techniques with the ethical obligation to meet professional standards of practice.

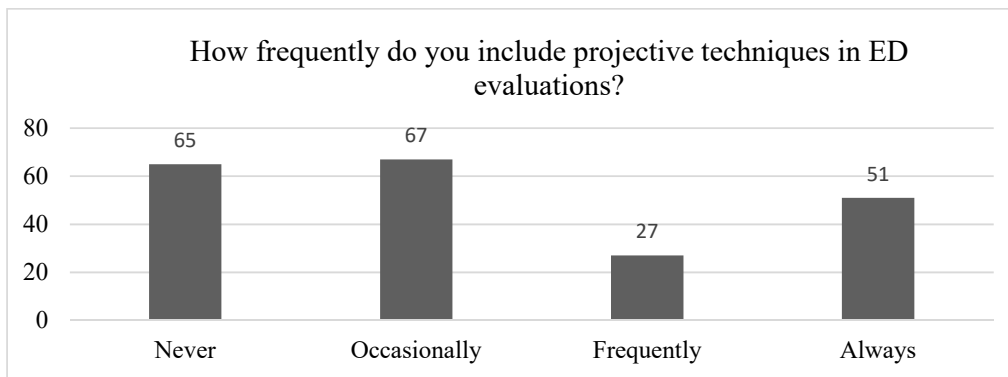


Figure 2: *How frequently do you include projective techniques in ED evaluations?* (n=210)

Of the 145 respondents that reported at least occasional use of projectives, 131 chose to respond to a follow-up question asking them to identify the specific techniques they used most frequently. These results are presented in Table 1. Within our sample, the drawing techniques were most popular (i.e., H-T-P, KFDS, Draw-a-Person), with approximately one quarter of this subset of respondents indicating their use in the majority of ED evaluations (>50% of all ED evaluations). Again, these results were unexpected given the inherent problems with the standardization, reliability, and validity of these instruments. Furthermore, the manuals (Buck, 1964; Knoff & Prout, 1985; Ogdon, 1977) for interpreting these particular drawing techniques are outdated and fraught with unsubstantiated sexual references and comments insensitive to various groups (e.g., the LBGT community).

The respondents reported the use of other alternative projective assessment techniques on a much less frequent basis (see Table 1). Only 1-3% of those who use projective techniques reported the use of the TAT, CAT, or Rorschach. Such findings were not unexpected given these instruments' focus on adult populations.

Table 1
Percentage of School Psychologist's Evaluations that include each Projective Technique, Respondents reporting at least occasional use of projective techniques (n=131)

<u>Projective Technique (% of time included)</u>	<u>51 – 100%</u>	<u>11 – 50%</u>	<u>0 – 10%</u>
House-Tree-Person (HTP)	34	31	66
Kinetic Family Drawing	33	29	69
Thematic Apperception Test	4	10	117
Children's Apperception Test	2	12	117
Bender-Gestalt	6	10	115
Rorschach	3	2	126
Draw-a-Person (DAP)	27	21	83

n=131

Conclusion

Four decades after the first special education law was passed by the U.S. congress, the category ED continues to be a source of controversy within the field of psychological assessment (Merrell & Walker, 2004). The ED criteria adopted in the 1975 landmark legislation (and still in effect today) originated from research that was conducted in the 1960s (Bower, 1982). Since then, psychologists have struggled to identify students with ED, largely due to eligibility criteria that have been characterized as vague, poorly defined, and professionally indefensible (e.g., Olympia et al., 2004; Skiba, Grizzle, & Minke, 1994).

Despite evidence of dubious reliability and validity (Garb et al., 2002; Lilienfeld, Ammirati, & David, 2012; Miller & Nickerson, 2006), 31% of respondents use projective techniques in the majority (>50%) of evaluations, and 19-24% use them in all ED evaluations. Among the projective measures, those with the least empirical support (e.g., H-T-P, KFDS) were most widely used. No differences were found between psychologists with <10 years of experience and those with 10+ years of experience (p.>.01). Trainers and practitioners are encouraged to review contemporary research and consider the appropriateness of including these measures in evaluations of a vulnerable and underserved population of children.

Limitations

The data and results presented in this paper include several limitations. First, the study is based on data collected from only 214 school psychologists practicing in relatively restricted geographic regions. Further study of ED assessment practices incorporating a broader and more representative sample is necessary. Second, the results were based on retrospective

estimates made by school psychologists regarding their assessment practices. An examination of the actual assessment techniques included in these evaluations would result in a more accurate accounting of current practices. This could occur through an examination of district, state, and national data pools.

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